



Rhode Island news

[Comments](#) 0 | [Recommend](#)  0

Summer fellowships give R.I. college students leg up on research

01:00 AM EDT on Saturday, July 31, 2010

By **Gina Macris**

Journal Staff Writer



Vinny Browning, of Amgen, discusses the work of Vendita Correia, center, and Gabriella Brum, of Providence College, at the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellows Conference. At right is participant Simon Sarkisian.

The Providence Journal / Andrew Dickerman

SOUTH KINGSTOWN — Simon Sarkisian of Warwick, a recent Providence College graduate, has stepped to the front line of the biomedical research that policymakers hope will fuel the new economy in Rhode Island.

And he says he never would have thought of his chosen field if he hadn't had a chance to work in a real lab as an undergraduate.

Sarkisian and nearly 100 of his contemporaries, most of them still undergraduates, presented the results of their most recent research on Friday at a conference at the University of Rhode Island, where they got a chance to shine

for attendees who included policymakers in business, academia and science.

Sarkisian, dressed in a suit and tie, stood next to a poster that explained in detail the way two compounds related to the herb St. John's wort show promise for combating drug-resistant bacteria that spread disease in hospitals.

He said he developed a passion for research two summers ago, when he got a chance to work in the infectious diseases research laboratory at the VA Medical Center in Providence.

Sarkisian's engrossing summer jobs at the VA lab have been part of the federally funded Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program (SURF) linked to ongoing multimillion-dollar initiatives sponsored by the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation in Rhode Island and about two dozen other states.

Sarkisian's mentor, URI Prof. David Rowley, said the federal government is supporting scientific research in Rhode Island that is "important to society."

But "the students themselves and the training they receive is the most important outcome," he said. "We are training the next generation of scientists."

Sarkisian and other students agree that their summer fellowships have given them a chance to experience the thrill of discovery at a pivotal time in their education.

At age 31, Aimee Welch has already switched careers once and is almost done with her second bachelor's degree at URI, this time in environmental science and management.

"I always really liked science," she said.

She had worked in the textile industry until two successive employers went out of business.

Welch's experiment indicates that planting more trees along the coast would help prevent algae blooms that suck oxygen out of the water when they die and kill large numbers of fish.

Lauren Whittle, 21, a rising senior in psychology at Rhode Island College, said the hands-on research "makes you feel like you're taking a step toward your career, rather than just getting through it" by reading, writing papers and taking tests for four years.

"It's too late" to find out in graduate school that a chosen career is not a good match, said Whittle.

She and two other psych majors, Katie Cilento and Renata Veiga, have designed a video to test the verb comprehension of infants at 14, 16 and 18 months of age. The experiment, just getting under way, will enroll a total of 96 infants.

Key to the experiment is a device that tracks the eye movement of babies looking at videos that ask them to find objects, or animation showing actions such as crying. Whittle said the tracker was funded by the NIH Institutional Development Award Networks of Biomedical Research Excellence, which promotes interdisciplinary, collaborative research in Rhode Island and other chosen states. The so-called INBRE grant, along with the Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research of the U.S. Department of Energy, supported the summer undergraduate research fellowship program that culminated in Friday's conference.

gmacris@projo.com